

What is mastery?

The Full Frame Initiative (FFI) defines mastery as *the degree to which a person feels in control of her or his fate and the decisions she or he makes, and where she or he experiences some correlation between efforts and outcomes*. To experience mastery, a person must feel that a situation can be controlled or changed, and that she or he has the skills and ability to influence the situation.¹

Why is mastery important?

People do not function equally in all parts of their lives. Successfully accomplishing goals in particular areas of life is called “self-efficacy.” People can have a sense of efficacy in multiple areas of their lives (e.g., their role as parent, employee, or student). However, mastery is an overall sense of control that a person has over her or his life. People also must feel that they have a direct influence on their environment.³ A person who feels little or no control over, or ability to change, her or his life or environment will likely have difficulty accomplishing goals and facing challenges in many areas. Mastery is the primary motivator for perseverance and personal change.

What are the health and other implications of mastery?

Mastery helps people and families access the resources and social support they need to thrive. However, the health impacts of mastery are far broader than just access to resources. For example,

- ✦ People in stressful life circumstances (such as caregiving or disability) who feel more in control have lower rates of depression and anxiety.^{4,5}
- ✦ Economic hardship negatively impacts people’s physical and psychological health, but the negative impact is less for people who have a greater sense of mastery.⁶
- ✦ The relationship between mastery and health has even been found among individuals enduring long-term hardship, indicating that mastery, once developed, may be long-standing.^{7,8,9}
- ✦ When people feel a greater sense of mastery, they are more likely to seek preventative care, experience sickness less often, and recover faster.¹⁰
- ✦ For youth, a greater degree of mastery has been linked to a smoother transition into adulthood, particularly for those who also have higher levels of parental and partner support.¹¹
- ✦ Self-efficacy has been identified as a buffer against negative outcomes. For example, substance use is regularly associated with trauma exposure, but self-efficacy is predictive of less substance use.¹²
- ✦ Adverse experiences do not always result in negative outcomes. Some people derive meaning and purpose out of traumatic experiences, such as an increased appreciation for life and more meaningful relationships. This increased mastery is called “post-traumatic growth.”¹³

Related Terms, Concepts & Definitions:

COPING: How an individual faces, deals with, and attempts to overcome difficulties and adversities. Coping strategies can be positive, negative or both.

EMPOWERMENT: A process by which people gain control over their lives.

MEANING-MAKING: The process people use to make sense of significant life experiences, whether positive or negative.

POST-TRAUMATIC GROWTH: The development of personal functioning and wellbeing that exceeds a person’s level of functioning prior to the traumatic event.

REFLECTIVE CAPACITY: The capacity to critically analyze one’s experiences to achieve deeper meaning and understanding.

RESILIENCE: The presence of positive adaptation or outcomes in spite of adversity.

SELF-EFFICACY: The ability to complete tasks, specifically where efforts and actions will ultimately lead to achieving desired goals.

How is mastery acquired and increased?

People gain mastery by setting goals, taking the necessary steps to accomplish these goals, and attributing successes to their own efforts.² A person's sense of mastery changes over time as a result of encountering and navigating challenging situations successfully and acquiring new skills. Furthermore, people's sense of mastery develops in a feedback loop where: 1) goals are identified or challenging situations are encountered; 2) goals are then accomplished or challenging situations are successfully navigated; 3) a person then either attributes these successes to her or his own efforts or to some other factors; 4) if she or he is able to attribute the accomplishment to her or his own efforts, mastery increases and; 5) the feedback loop begins again with a person identifying a new set of goals or addressing challenges.

Does everyone have equal access to mastery?

No. Social and environmental context can affect a person's ability to gain a greater sense of mastery. Resources, such as social support, are unevenly distributed in society and as a result, different populations have varying abilities to create, access and maintain mastery.

- ✦ People who experience discrimination, such as racism, or those who live in poverty deal with challenges that minimize their ability to feel in control of their lives and impact their surroundings.^{14 15}
- ✦ A sense of mastery typically increases during adulthood, but begins to decrease with declining health and retirement in old age.¹⁶
- ✦ People with higher income and more education are more likely to have a greater sense of mastery.¹⁷ They often also have more resources and opportunities to continue to develop their mastery.¹⁸
- ✦ When people lose their jobs, their sense of mastery may greatly diminish due to a loss in income and socioeconomic status.¹⁹

How is mastery related to others Domains of Wellbeing?

For comprehensive wellbeing, mastery must be experienced along with social connectedness, stability, safety, and meaningful access to relevant resources. For example:

- ✦ **Mastery and Social Connectedness:** Individuals with mastery may have an easier time accessing their social connections. If advice, encouragement and other forms of emotional support are provided in a friendly and non-intrusive fashion, people usually welcome them.²⁰ By contrast, receiving too much financial or practical assistance may decrease people's sense of mastery, impacting their emotional health, decreasing their sense of self-efficacy, and causing them to feel discouraged.²¹
- ✦ **Mastery and Stability:** Having stability allows individuals to feel as though they have control over their own lives and their communities. Experiencing violence and chaos in a community increases the level of fear people experience and, at the same time, reduces people's perception that they are in control of their lives. This creates a sense that one is powerless to escape a bad situation, which is distressing.²² Stability and mastery reinforce each other and can help create communities that feel in control, thereby promoting overall wellbeing.

*This fact sheet is one of a series on the Full Frame Initiative's Five Domains of Wellbeing — **social connectedness, stability, safety, mastery and meaningful access to relevant resources** — the universal, interdependent and non-hierarchical essential needs we all have. The Full Frame Initiative's mission is to change systems so that people and communities experiencing poverty, violence and trauma have the tools, supports and resources they need to thrive.*

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Endnotes

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